

‘aliveness’ is the noun form of ‘alive.’ But whatever grammatical form you like, to be alive is to have life. It is to be marked by animation, activity, alertness, and energy. We are caught alive by Jesus, who calls us into the joy of being his disciples. He does not just invite us into the endeavor, if we so choose. Like with the three new disciples on the beach, Jesus declares it is what we are about: catching other people alive, that they, too, might know the joy of living his way. We experience the aliveness he offers and by our actions and words, we demonstrate it to others.

At Christmas, my family popped open those holiday crackers, which are each filled with a paper crown, a joke, and a little toy. The best toy this year turned out to be a thin, red fish, almost a piece of film, just a few inches long. It is supposed to be a fortune teller. You lay it flat in your hand and see how it moves. Bizarrely it does move, seemingly on its own, though maybe it’s really due to static electricity. If the tail jumps, it says you’re in love. If the head moves, you’re happy, and so on. I doubt I’ll ever stick that little fish symbol on my car. But the symbol of this filmy, flipping fish in my hand—that, I really like. It has a life of its own. It cannot help but jump and bend. It seems to be caught, yet is alive.

And so we, as disciples, are caught alive into the life of Christ because Jesus has called us there from our everyday lives. Our mission is to claim that aliveness—which includes meaning and purpose, but not always ease. Our mission is also to catch others up into that new life, too. So that together, we might swim, wriggle, bend, and jump in the waters of God’s love.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



January 26, 2025
Third Sunday of Epiphany
“Caught Alive”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Scripture: Luke 5:1-11

For two millennia, Christians have used the image of a fish to symbolize their faith. Fish feature prominently in so many Bible stories from the five loaves and the fish, to the risen Jesus eating fish on the beach, to this story about the call of the first disciples and their miraculous catch of fish. For some Christians, there was a time when it was so popular to stick that little fish outline on the back of their car. It was kind of like wearing a cross around your neck as a symbol of faith, except this was on a person’s vehicle. Which is all fine and well until you realize the car road raging beside you has that fish plastered on the back. But I digress. The fish symbol might have gained a certain type of popularity in our lifetimes, but it is hardly modern. The fish was one of the earliest images that followers of Jesus used to identify themselves. Many believe it was used as a secret way to identify themselves to each other, especially when Christians were being persecuted. The Greek word for fish is *ichthys*. Early followers of Jesus made an acrostic from each of the letters of the word in Greek, which read “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.” Those words and the image of the fish are meant to be shorthand for a life of discipleship, of following Jesus and sharing the new life he brings.

When Jesus showed up at the beach, Simon Peter, James and John, had come up empty-handed on their night of fishing. With his empty boat, Simon Peter didn’t put up a fuss about letting Jesus borrow it for a floating pulpit. But he did push back when Jesus urged the partners to go out into the water and put down their nets once more. “We’ve worked the whole night long. We caught nothing,” he said. But because Jesus said so, Simon Peter put his crew into the boats, went out into the deep water, and threw the nets over once more.

Can you imagine the spectacle on the shore when they started catching fish? Luke said there was a huge crowd on the beach listening to Jesus; they were all pushing in on each other. So when the boats went out again

1 Hallie Golden, AP, “Salmon return to lay eggs in historic habitat after largest dam removal project in US history,” November 18, 2024, Jefferson Public Radio, <https://www.ijpr.org/environment-energy-and-transportation/2024-11-18/salmon-return-to-lay-eggs-in-historic-habitat-after-largest-dam-removal-project-in-us-history>

and started to haul in net after net absolutely teeming with wriggling, squirming fish, the people must have been amazed.

Simon Peter was alarmed at first. What was this strange thing happening in front of him, that could have been magic, witchcraft, or maybe prophecy? In his gut, though, Simon Peter knew it was God at work. To have God up close and personal, doing miraculous things, was unnerving! He knew he was just a regular guy, who wasn't sure he measured up to the holy things happening around him. Like Mary when she was approached by Gabriel; like the shepherds who were greeted by angels, fear and alarm are a common reaction to a holy presence. But Jesus was ready for that reaction. He gave the standard divine reply: "Do not be afraid." Because just like for Mary and for the shepherds, God had a holy purpose and task for these fisher folk. Jesus declared, "From now on, you will be catching people."

With his simple phrase, Jesus drew Simon Peter, James, and John into a new kind of life.

But Initially that word "catch" feels wrong. I think of a cat catching a mouse, which usually does not end very well for the mouse. And when all those fish got caught in the nets, they were just minutes from their destiny as a tasty meal on some hungry person's plate. Then there's that old phrase, "Well, he's quite a *catch*." Catching in that way implies power and control over someone, luring them in with a snare. Surely catching people in these ways is not what Jesus meant for his new disciples, nor is that what it means to live a life with God.

The word Luke put in Jesus' mouth here is quite rare. When Jesus says "you will be *catching* people," the word means 'to *catch alive*.' It's a different word than every other instance of *catch* in the passage, which refers to fish that would soon be dead. To be caught alive is to be caught up in the wonder and goodness of God. It is to have your life turned upside down and made new. Jesus wants to catch—to hold onto people—so that they might live. He wants people to get caught up in the life-giving mission of God and to invite others to do the same. Simon Peter, James, and John walked away from the best haul of fish they ever had, to be caught up in a totally new kind of life centered on God's love. Their new vocation was to call others into that life-affirming way of being, too.

A powerful story about fish that are alive, once again, caught my eye recently. On the Oregon-California border, the Klamath River winds its way around mountains and branches off into many smaller streams. The Klamath river was once the third-largest salmon producing river on the West Coast. Salmon spend most of their lives swimming in the Pacific

Ocean, and then they return to the cool waters of the river and streams to lay their eggs. But between 1918 and 1962, four dams were installed on the Klamath to produce a moderate amount of electricity that eventually powered 70,000 homes. The dams cut off the salmon's access to the streams. And they caused the water to get too hot for the fish, while also making it polluted with toxic algae. The salmon's numbers were decimated. Their future seemed as good as dead.

For years, local Native American tribes have worked tirelessly to bring attention to the destruction the dams have wrought and to fight for their removal. The decimation of the salmon population has impacted their lives and culture throughout the region. Finally after protests and legal battles and endless campaigning, in October of last year, the four dams were blown up and removed. The Klamath River now flows freely again. And less than one month later, salmon were already traveling the length of the river. As the Associated Press reported, "A giant female Chinook salmon flips on her side in the shallow water and wriggles wildly, using her tail to carve out a nest in the riverbed as her body glistens in the sunlight. In another moment, males butt into each other as they jockey for a good position to fertilize eggs."¹ Video shot by the Yurok Tribe shows hundreds of salmon venturing into the Klamath's tributaries. The temperature of the water has dropped 14 degrees from its previous average, and the cooler temperatures keep the fish healthy. The salmon that had previously been caught and stopped dead in their tracks by the dams, are alive again! They are now caught up in the life they were made for!

Could it be that's what being caught alive looks like? Like swimming freely in the life of gratitude and service we were made for. Like joyfully wriggling in our healthy lives that embrace the love that God has given us, and sharing the love widely. Like working hard to be the people God has made us to be, swimming fiercely with our purpose in mind. Even though we are merely human, which is to say, we are sinners, we do not need to be afraid of being caught by Jesus. Because we are not caught dead with him, but rather, we are caught alive in order to follow him. After Pacific salmon like the ones in the Klamath reproduce, the fish die. Their bodies decompose, feeding other animals, and the nutrients go back into the stream. Out of death, comes life, again. And so perhaps to be caught alive is to live into our full vocation as disciples, trusting that resurrection will get the last word.

A couple of weeks ago the children drew out an Epiphany star word for our church. The one they picked out was "aliveness." A few people asked me, "is aliveness even a word?" Merriam-Webster assures me that yes,